



## A New Survey of Views from Rural America

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Rural America is changing dramatically under pressures from globalization, demographic shifts, new migration patterns and environmental transformation. Some attractive rural areas are growing as baby boomers move there to retire, and as “footloose professionals” choose to settle in smaller communities. Other rural places, long dependent on resources such as agriculture or timber, have a history of booms and busts. Lately, some of these have seen new immigrants arriving to fill low-skill jobs in resource industries that once supported the middle class. Finally, there are some chronically poor rural communities where decades of underinvestment have left a legacy of deep poverty and problematic community institutions. Rural America consists of several types of places, heading into the future along very different paths.

To learn more about how rural Americans view the changes now underway in their communities, Carsey Institute researchers recently began a study of Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA). The first stage of this project involved telephone surveys of more than 6,500 people living in rural counties of six distinct regions: the Rocky Mountains, Pacific Northwest, Northeast, Midwest, Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta. A to-

tal of 15 counties in 8 different states were selected to represent a wide variety of circumstances, from boom to decline. Questions covered topics that ranged from respondent’s personal background and experiences (such as family, jobs, education and life situation) to their migration history and expectations, and views about their region, local government and community. This unique comparative project has been supported by grants from the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and the Kellogg and Ford Foundations.

The CERA surveys were just recently completed, and will be studied closely over the months ahead. This report presents a first look at some of the similarities and differences we found across our six rural regions.<sup>1</sup>

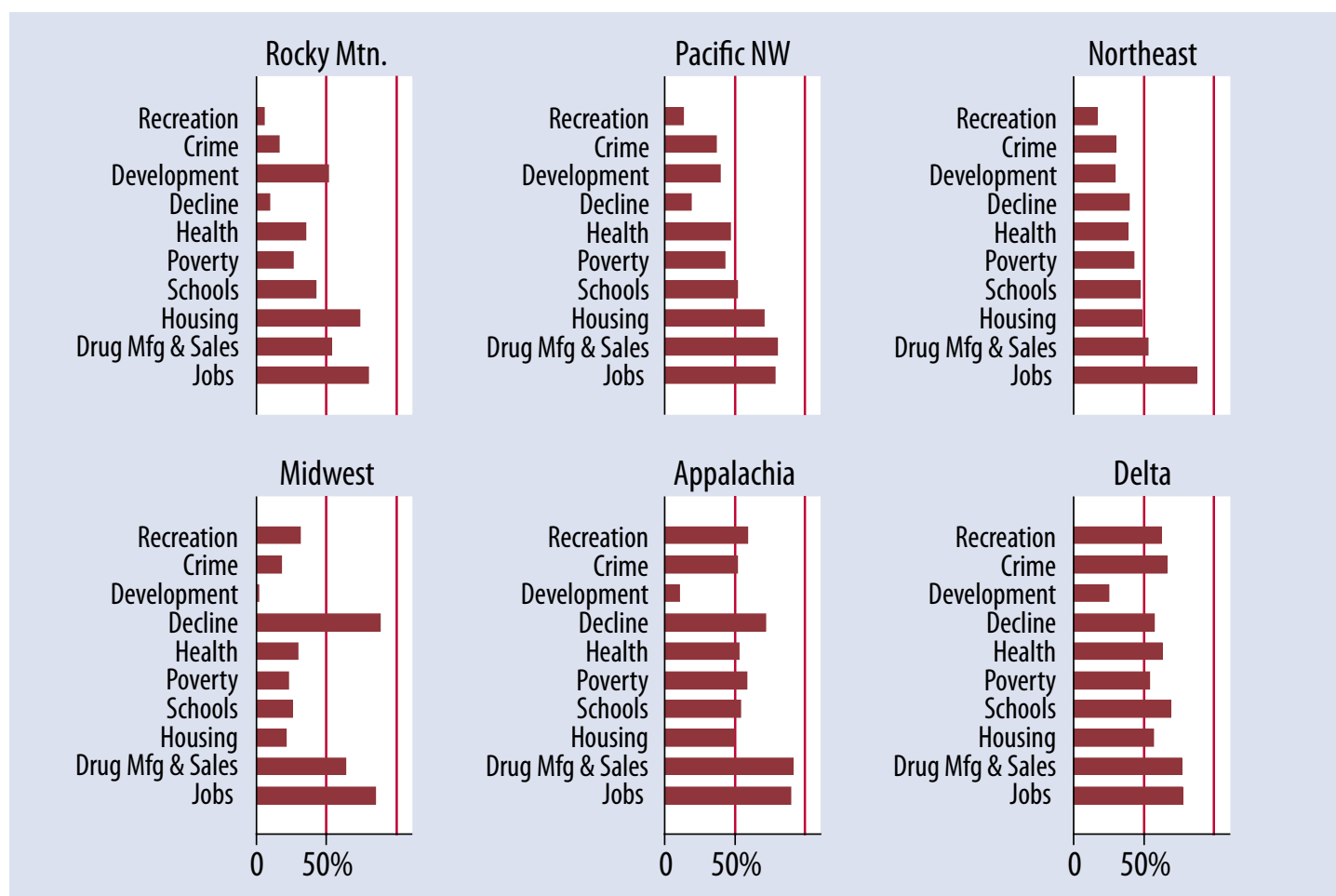
<sup>1</sup> Separate confidence intervals or significance tests are not reported with our results here, to keep the discussion straightforward. Given the large sample sizes, however, most contrasts that appear visually striking will be statistically significant as well. For example, within any of the six regional subsamples (which have 1,000 to 1,500 respondents each), the margin of error for percentages should be about  $\pm 3\%$ .

Which of the following do you consider to be **IMPORTANT PROBLEMS** facing your community today?

- Violent or property crime*
- Manufacturing or sales of illegal drugs*
- Lack of affordable housing*
- Too-rapid development, growth or sprawl*
- Schools not as good as they should be*
- Lack of job opportunities*
- Lack of recreational opportunities*
- Poverty or homelessness*
- Population declining as people move away*
- Not enough health and social services*

**Figure 1** graphs the responses from about 6,500 people in six rural regions. Several contrasts stand out. “Population declining as people move away,” for example, is an important issue in the Midwest but not at all in the Rocky Mountains—where the opposite trouble, “Too-rapid development, growth or sprawl,” is of greater concern. “Lack of job opportunities” is among the most important problems everywhere, but in the Pacific Northwest, Appalachia and the Delta, “Drug manufacturing or sales” ranks at least equally high. Few people in the amenity-rich Rocky Mountains, Pacific Northwest or Northeast complain about a “Lack of recreational opportunities,” but this problem appears more acute in Appalachia and the Delta. “Violent or property crime” is more problematic in Appalachia and the Delta as well.

FIGURE 1: “What do you consider to be important problems facing your community today?” (Percentages)



*I'm going to read a list of environmental issues that might be problems in some rural places. With regard to the place where YOU live, for each issue I'd like to know whether you think this has had no effect, had minor effects, or had major effects ON YOUR FAMILY OR COMMUNITY OVER THE PAST 5 YEARS?*

*Conversion of farmland to other uses*

*Loss of forestry jobs or income*

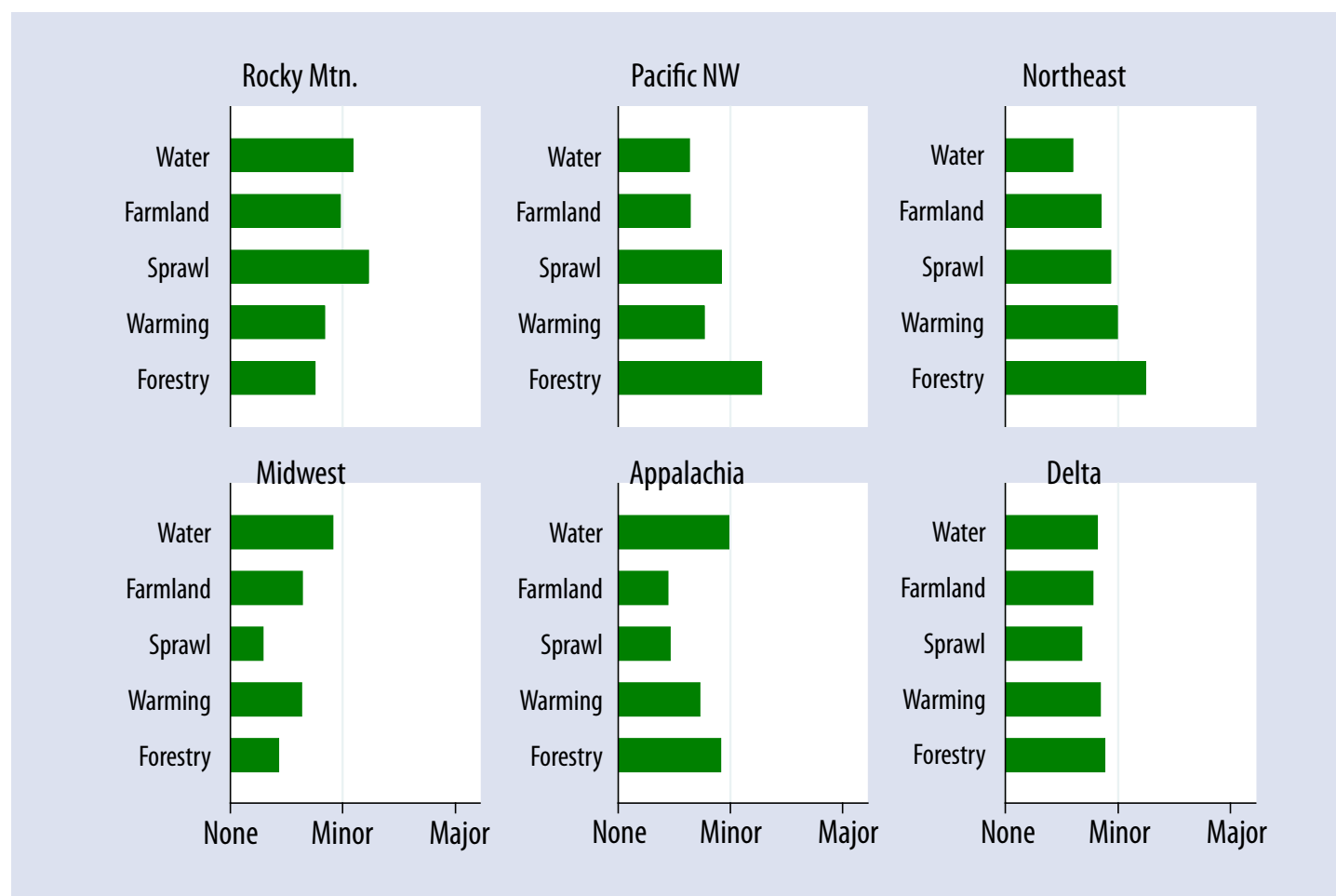
*Water quality or supply problems*

*Global warming or climate change*

*Urban sprawl or rapid development of the countryside*

**Figure 2** shows how people responded to this question about recent impacts of environmental issues on their own family and community. Unsurprisingly, the loss of forestry jobs was most salient in the historically forest-dependent Northwest and Northeast, but less so in Midwest farm country. Urban sprawl or rapid development was particularly troublesome to residents of the Rocky Mountains, Northwest and Northeast. Water quality or supply problems were least problematic in the water-rich and comparatively unpolluted Northwest and Northeast. Elsewhere, drier climate or pollution worries bring water issues to prominence. Global warming receives most recognition in the Northeast, where a noticeable trend towards warmer, less snowy winters has affected recreation and winter tourism.

**FIGURE 2:** “Have these environmental issues had no effect, minor effects, or major effects on your family and community over the past 5 years?” (Means)



*Do the following things seem... not important... somewhat important... or... very important to you, when you think about whether you will stay here or move away in the future?*

*Living near family*

*Job or employment opportunities*

*Educational opportunities*

*Housing opportunities*

*Outdoors or other recreational opportunities*

*Natural beauty of the area*

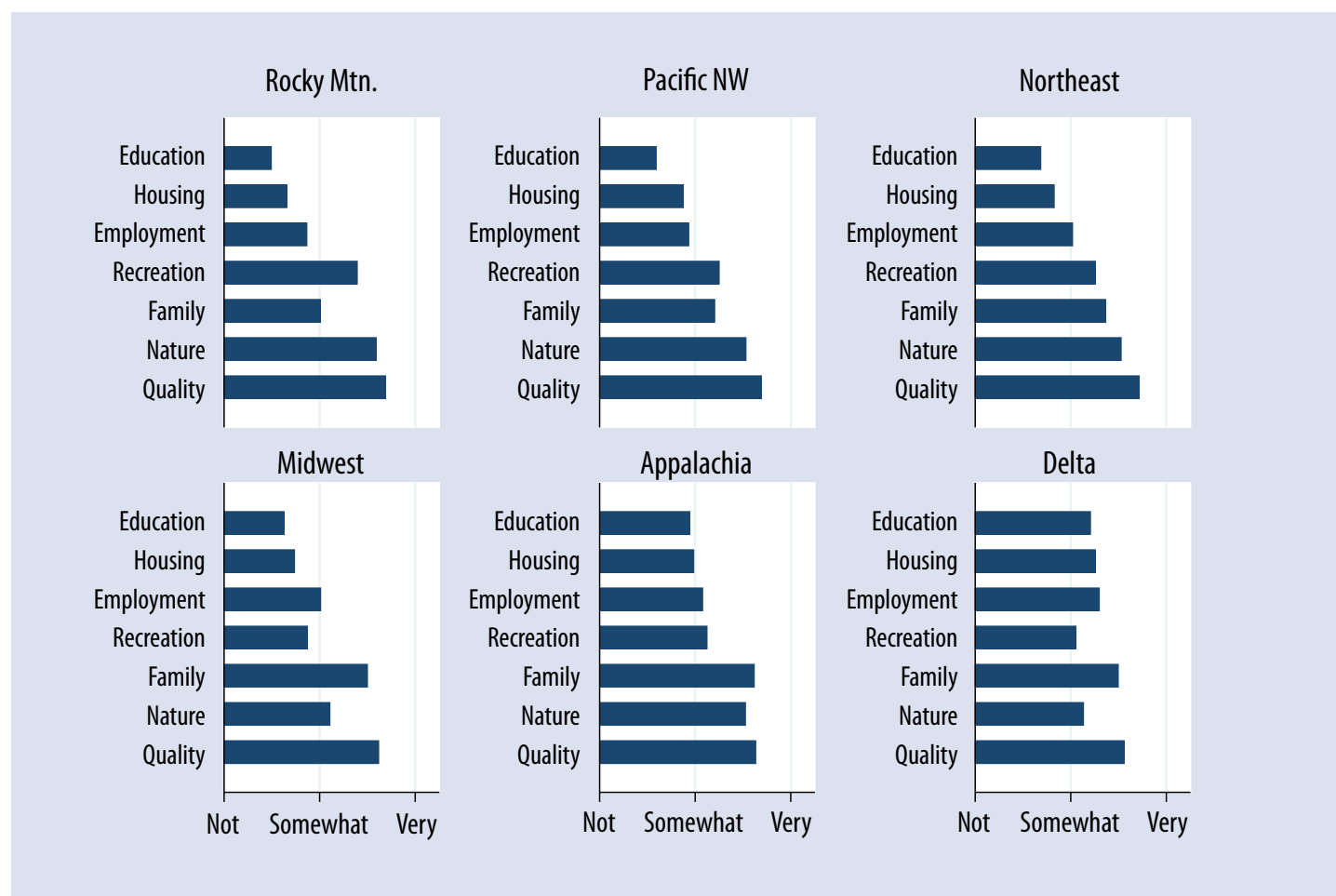
*General quality of life*

The future of rural places depends critically on migration flows, including the retention or loss of young adults. **Figure 3** depicts responses concerning what seems important to people as they consider whether or not to stay. A similar pattern appears across most of these regions: quality of life, natural beauty and family, three traditional strengths of rural life, are most often cited as important reasons to stay. Conversely, opportunities for

education, jobs and housing—generally the strong points of cities—tend to be reasons for leaving, not for staying. This pattern holds with interesting minor variations (such as the reversal of “recreation” and “family” priorities in the Rocky Mountains and Midwest, respectively) across five of our six regions. In the Mississippi Delta, however, education, housing and employment are seen as reasons to stay.

**Figure 3** reflects the unhappy tradeoff that people face when thinking about whether to stay in a rural community or leave. Especially in the three amenity-rich regions (Rockies, Northwest and Northeast), reasons for staying include a high quality of life, natural beauty, family and recreation. But for young adults in particular, education, housing and jobs tend to be more critical needs, and these might be sought somewhere else. Conversely, retirees or others who do not depend on the local economy for their income, already have education, and can afford decent housing, will often find the rural beauty and quality of life more compelling. These are key motivations behind the shifting population makeup in such amenity-rich rural areas.

**FIGURE 3:** “Do the following things seem not important, somewhat important, or very important to you, when you think about whether you will stay here or move away in the future?” (Means)



*For the future of your community, do you think it is more important to use natural resources to create jobs, or to conserve natural resources for future generations?*

*Use natural resources to create jobs*

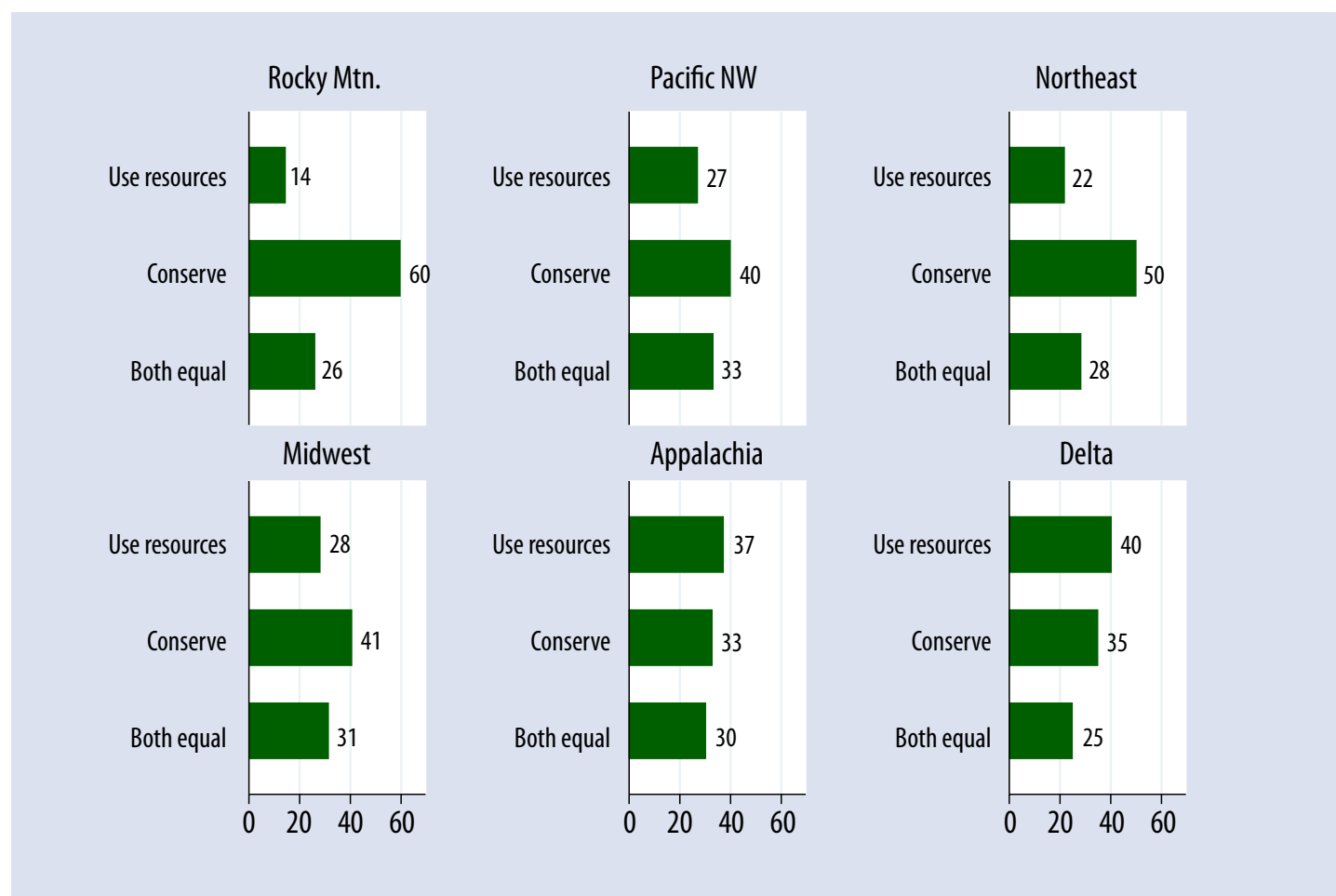
*Conserve natural resources for the future*

*Creating jobs and conserving resources are both equally important*

Historically, development in all of these rural areas depended on resource-based livelihoods such as farming, forestry or mining. Today, all the areas face changes as resource occupations support fewer people. Should resource use be intensified—for example through more mining or logging—in order to provide more jobs? Or should efforts instead go toward conserving natural resources for the present and future generations? Local versions of this debate occur in many rural places. Figure 4 shows a striking overall pattern.

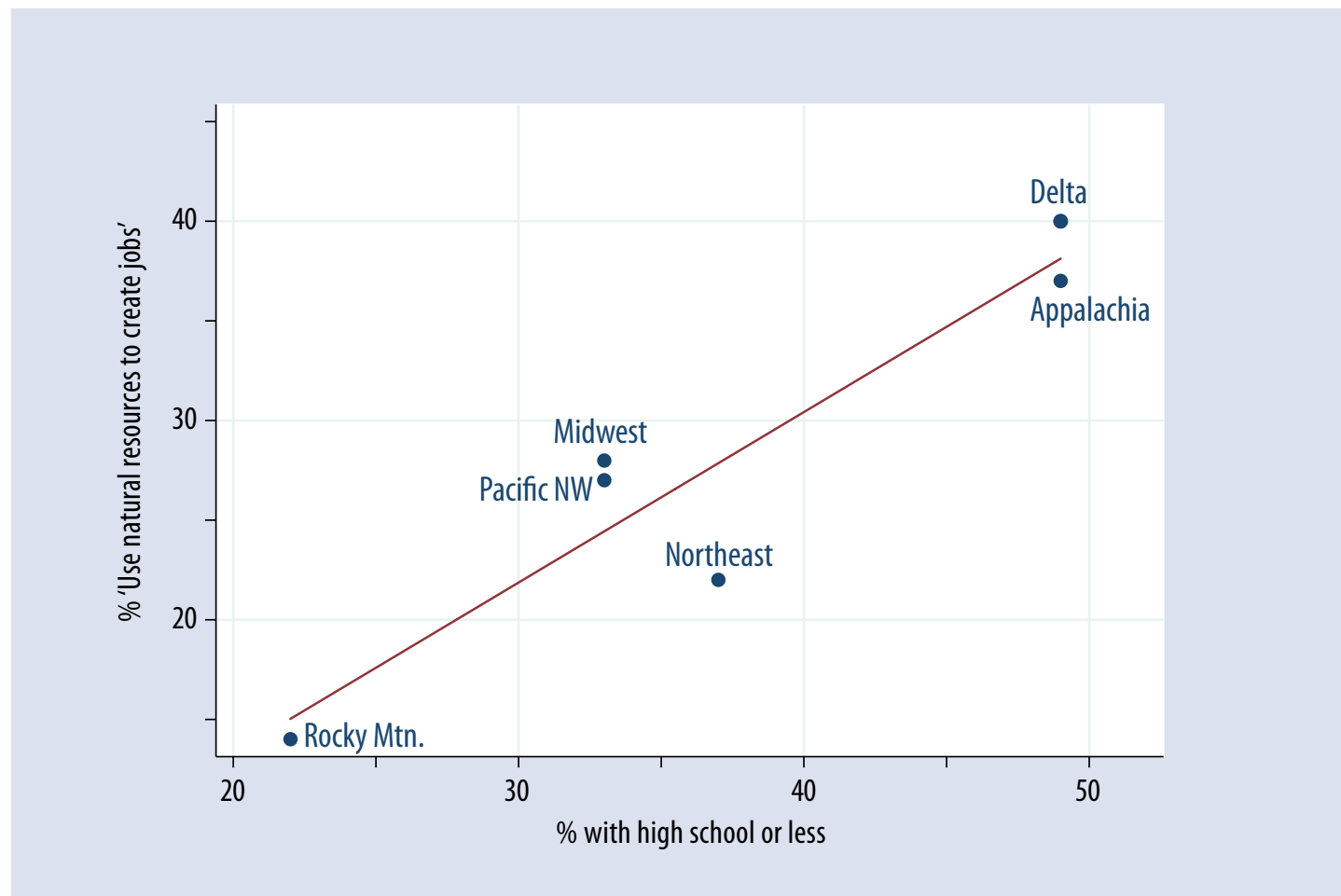
Rocky Mountain respondents chose “conserve” over “use resources” by a wide margin, 60% to 14% (with 26% choosing “both”). Northeast respondents also strongly supported conservation (50% to 22%). Conservation was the top choice among Northwest and Midwest respondents too, but by narrower margins. Appalachia and Delta respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to choose “use resources.”

**FIGURE 4:** “For the future of your community, do you think it is more important to use natural resources to create jobs, or to conserve natural resources for future generations?” (Percentages)





**FIGURE 5: Natural capital and human capital: Percent of respondents choosing “Use natural resources to create jobs” vs. percent with high school education or less, for six rural regions.**



These results indicate that enthusiasm for conservation of natural resources tends to be high in places where human resources, in the form of wealth or education, are high too. Conversely, conservation holds less importance in places where human resources such as education are less developed, and people might have fewer choices for jobs. Taking a step-back view, **figure 5** graphs the percentage of respondents choosing “use resources” against the percentage with a high school education or less, across each of the six regions. As the proportion with high school or less increases, the proportion favoring natural resource use increases as well. A similar up-to-right trend would appear if we graphed instead the proportion favoring conservation against the proportion with college degrees.

The causal processes that underlie this pattern are complex. The expression “resource use” undoubtedly brings different possibilities to mind for residents of the Mississippi Delta, Northeastern forests, Midwestern farmlands, Rocky Mountain valleys or Appalachian mining country. Figure 5 suggests, however, the reasonable idea that pressures to use rather than

conserve natural resources are stronger where economic alternatives, partly a function of human resources, are fewer. If people have more education or skills, they are more likely to see personal alternatives to resource-based employment, and might also place higher values on conservation for the future.

The graphs in this report explore just a few of the CERA topics. In the months ahead, further analyses of survey results will be posted on the Carsey Institute’s website ([www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu](http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu)), including our Snapshots of Social Change feature.

## About the Author

Snapshots of Social Change is written by Lawrence Hamilton, a Senior Fellow with the Carsey Institute and Professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire (<http://pubpages.unh.edu/~lch>).



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